

which brings us back to the hero's shoulders by alanabloom

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Summary:

Will Byers is fifteen years old, and there is a monster living in his chest.

It's been there for awhile, over two years now. It was quiet for a lot of that, sleeping maybe, save for an occasional low, throaty growl rumbling beneath Will's heartbeat, or a provoked stretch in which the edge of its nails grazed lightly across Will's ribcage. But for the past few months, something has shaken the beast into emergence from its lengthy hibernation.

He's getting to know the monster well. If Will drew it, it would be a dark, bristled creature, clawed and fanged with green, green eyes.

part i. is a general Will coming out, coming to terms, etc. fic taking place in high school. It can be read on its own.

part ii. is college era, and gets into the ship pairing.

1. Chapter 1

November 2, 1986

Will Byers is fifteen years old, and there is a monster living in his chest.

It's been there for awhile, over two years now. It was quiet for a lot of that, sleeping maybe, save for an occasional low, throaty growl rumbling beneath Will's heartbeat, or a provoked stretch in which the edge of its nails grazed lightly across Will's ribcage.

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The monster has never been louder than it was two nights ago, at Jennifer Hayes' Halloween party. When he accidentally found Mike and El, in Jennifer's little brother's room.

The monster didn't just growl, it *roared*, the first time it's been loud enough for Will to maybe understand what it's so angry about.

That's what it feels like in his chest at least: *anger*, the big, scary, dangerous kind. Except when the sound of its howls hit the back of Will's throat, it stung the way it does when he's about to cry.

"Will?"

It's El, knocking at his door. Will reaches for his stereo and cranks the volume up, just a little. Not enough so she notices, but enough so he can pretend not to hear her.

El's in Jonathan's old room now. Will thought that was going to be

strange, when his mom and Hop first told him the plan, but it means Jonathan's stuff is in Will's room now, and he sleeps in there when he's home from college on breaks.

Even after three years, Will misses his brother living there full time. He likes having Jonathan's books and tapes around. He'd even give up his bed and be the one to take the cot, but Jonathan never lets him.

He was happy when El and Hop moved in. It made the house less lonely.

"Will!"

Now, though, he kind of wishes El would just go away.

She knocks again, louder, and Will doesn't want to get their parents' attention, so he finally gets up and opens the door. "What?"

El is standing there, not looking at all inconvenienced by the time it took him to answer. "What are you doing?"

"Drawing." He turns around, going back to his desk. She follows him.

"Can I watch?"

He usually likes when she watches. El can be quiet longer than anyone he knows; she's nothing like the girls at school, the ones who make Will nervous, fluttering around him like hummingbirds, touching his arm or ruffling his hair. El can sit for hours, intently watching a drawing take shape until she finally chooses a declarative: *pretty* or *scary* or *bitchin'*. Simple, singular adjectives, but she always manages to give the impression she's chosen them very carefully.

But the monster makes Will mean. He bends a little further over the drawing, shielding it from her view, and mutters, "No."

"Is it because you're sad?" El asks.

Will's pencil goes still on the page. "No."

She sits on the edge of his bed, and Will finally turns in his desk chair to look at her. She smiles at him, small and sweet. "Don't be sad."

Will hates this about El the most. Hop calls it "intuition", that she's just good at reading people, but it's different with Will. El can't read his mind, but it's like she can read his feelings. No one's sure why - maybe because they both spent so much time in the Upside Down - but it doesn't work both ways and Will doesn't think that's fair.

"I'm not sad."

"You are. I could tell even through the wall." She nods slightly at the wall between their bedrooms, then frowns a little, looking hurt. "Friends don't lie."

Will's throat narrows, and he grits his teeth. He wants to yell at her, say it's time to let go of this childhood commandment. Because sometimes friends grow up and need to keep their own secrets. If he could, Will would build a fortress around his secret, and all the stupid messy feelings that spill out of it.

Then El adds, "Brothers and sisters don't lie, either."

The monster is ramming against the wall of Will's chest, and it's not like this is the first time a monster's been allowed to control him. "You're not my sister."

He says it quiet. And he doesn't look at El's face. But the atmosphere between them changes, enough so even Will and his total lack of superpowers can feel it.

"What?" El sounds afraid, like she wants to be mistaken.

Will closes his eyes, but the monster bares its teeth. "Well, you're *not*. And my brother's not your brother, and my mom's not your mom, and Mike - " Heat flames under Will's skin. The monster whispers the rest of that sentence: *Mike used to be his*. As angry with himself as he is at her, he finishes by hurling out, "Hop's not even really your dad. So stop acting like you don't lie."

The next thing Will knows, he's dropping leadenly to the floor, his desk chair hurtling out from beneath and hitting the wall with a

crash. He lands hard on the ground, the impact clanging painfully up his spine, and Will cries out from the shock chased by pain. He whips around to stare at El, ineffectually flinging the colored pencil still clutched in his hand in her direction as he yells, "What is *WRONG* with you?!"

His mom and Hop burst in together, apparently having heard the crash. "What the hell's going on in here?"

The scene is laid out in front of them: Will on the ground, El standing by the foot of the bed, eyes narrowed, a damning trickle of blood rolling toward her mouth.

Will points accusingly at her, all claws by this point. "She yanked my chair out from under me. With her powers she's not even supposed to be using!"

Hop's expression turns dangerous immediately. He has no patience for anything that might draw unwanted attention to El, even if there's no one to witness it. He rounds on her, gruff and rattled. "What'd we say about that, huh?" El looks away. "'S that anyway to treat your brother?"

El's gaze finds Will's and holds on, so only he can read the hurt behind the venom when she spats out, "*Step* brother."

"Hey, c'mon now, what's that about?" Hopper barks, apparently rhetorically, as he puts himself between El and Will and practically herds her out of the room.

Will's mom hovers in the doorway for another moment, frowning at Will in a baffled kind of way. He can't meet her eyes for very long.

"What on earth were you two fighting about?"

Will can barely mumble around the lump in his throat, "Nothing."

"Will - "

"What, Mom?! You saw her freakin' nose, she *did* it. What more do you need?"

Joyce looks taken aback. Because Will doesn't raise his voice at her. He doesn't fight with El.

(He doesn't cry in Jennifer Hayes' bathroom like a pathetic little kid just because he saw his best friend and his sister do something they've been almost definitely been doing for literal *years*.)

"I have a hard time believing El did that out of nowhere, Will," his mom says with infuriating calm. "I'm asking you to give me a little context here."

Will closes his eyes, his chest lighting up as too-bright guilt streaks through him. The monster is quiet now. He keeps thinking about the look on El's face, and his stomach curls up tighter.

Finally, his mom sighs loud enough for his benefit, and gives up, though she says, "We're talking about this later."

But Will stays in his room for the rest of the night. No one makes him come to dinner. When the house is dark for the night, he sneaks to the kitchen for food and sees the TV flickering from the living room. He moves quietly back toward his room, catching a few snatches of conversation between his mom and stepdad.

"- fifteen years old, Joyce. Maybe that's the age where we gotta let 'em work shit out between themselves."

"It's just so unlike them. And I worry it's more than just one argument...Will's been quiet all weekend."

He tenses his jaw and slips quickly out of earshot, unnerved that his mom noticed something off with him, too.

So much for him being good at hiding.

He has to get better at this, figure out how to crumple up the chaotic mess of emotions and shove it to some corner inside himself that his mom and El and Mike (oh god, please please not *Mike*) can't see.

Jonathan comes home for Thanksgiving a few weeks later. Will isn't in the house waiting for him, and instead his older brother finds him, sitting in the fort in the woods with his headphones in and a drawing pad open on his knees, filling pages and pages with stinging green pastels.

"Permission to enter?" Jonathan calls, amusement ringing through his voice.

"Shut up," Will says, but a tiny smile gets loose anyway. It's always such a relief, when his brother gets home. The missing piece visiting the puzzle.

"Yeah, you're right," Jonathan ducks through the doorway, contorting himself to get inside. "As one of the original architects of Castle Byers, I shouldn't need permission to enter."

"Don't call it that," Will says. It's almost definitely embarrassing to be in your childhood fort at age fifteen, but the humiliation doubles if that fort still has a name.

Situating himself on the ground, Jonathan raises his eyebrows at Will. "How you doin'?"

"Fine."

"Mmm." Jonathan makes a show of checking out the place, his eyes still roving when he says casually, "Mom said you and El are fighting."

"Not anymore." Not technically, at least. Will hasn't apologized, just slipped back into his usual niceness with El, though it's more delicate than usual. He thinks El might be avoiding the house. And there's only one other place she goes, really.

That's why he's been coming to the fort the last few weeks, with his drawing pad and cassette player. If he's not in the house, he can't hear when El leaves and returns, so he can't spend every second in between acutely aware that she's alone with Mike.

It's so *stupid*. Because none of this is new.

Will didn't really get it, when he first came back home and woke up in the hospital. It was hard to picture *Eleven*, this girl with superpowers, or picture her actually hanging out with his friends, slipping into his spot in the group while he was missing. They weren't good at making friends with girls - or anyone outside the four of them. It was mainly Lucas and Dustin telling him things about her, tripping over each other to recall the time she made Troy pee his pants, or how she saved Mike when he jumped off a cliff.

She sounded like a story.

After awhile, it became clear that Mike was the one who missed El the most. But it still never occurred to Will to wonder whether Mike *like* liked her. This girl who saved Mike's life and vanquished bullies, this girl with the shaved head whose nose bled when she controlled things with her mind.

To Will, that girl was like a legend. Not someone his friends might get a crush on, like Jennifer Hayes or Madison Burke.

But then came the Snow Ball. And suddenly that legend was just a thirteen year old kid, just like them, blushing when Mike stepped on her feet, smiling when he held her hand and didn't let go.

The legend became Will's friend. And then, later, his sister.

And very occasionally, the person who's stealing Will's best friend.

That's all Will wants this to be. Just sadness that Mike is moving beyond the part in his life where his *friends*, Will and Lucas and Dustin, were his favorite people, when nothing beat hanging out with them. Because in the beginning, it still felt like that was true. Yes, the group often included Max and El, but nothing changed in a way

that was bad.

Max and Lucas broke up, the summer before high school started, and after an awkward few weeks they decided they missed being friends, had been missing that all along. They dissolved like most middle school couples do.

But Mike and Eleven quietly endured. It was a background thing, an undercurrent. But since last semester, it's felt more serious. It's not just Mike and El sitting close in the Wheeler's basement, swapping private smiles or holding hands, disappearing without explanation but only for a few minutes when the whole party is together.

It's Mike spending less and less time with the guys, wanting to see El on his own, without anyone else around. It's Mike calling the house and asking Will right away to speak to El, nothing more than a *hey* exchanging between them. It's El being the only one invited over, and Will always forced to watch her leave.

Over and over, Will has reassured himself it's normal, that he's just feeling left behind as Mike's friend. If Dustin or Lucas had a front row seat to all the times Mike chose Eleven over them, they'd almost definitely feel just as bad.

But then. That Halloween party. The way it felt to see them kissing...

Really kissing. Mike's hands on her face, El's fingers tangled through his dark hair, Will's own curling into desperate fists at his side...

That felt like something else.

Now, Jonathan looks at Will in that patient, searching way of his. "I always thought you two get along."

"We do. It's just..." He stares down at his hands, nervously picking at his pencil's yellow paint. Jonathan just waits. He's good at silence. It usually makes Will tell him stuff.

"It's just it's not fair, sometimes." The words leap out of him, and Will can feel himself shrinking back into a petty, whiny little kid. "How El just...got to come in and take over."

Jonathan's eyebrows knit together. "You mean in the house?"

"No...."

"Then where?"

"Just. With my friends. I was *stuck* and she got to just...replace me or something."

He can usually rely on Jonathan to understand him, but now his older brother is frowning in confusion. After awhile, he says, "Seems like you waited a long time to get mad about it."

"I'm not *mad*, I'm..." Will trails off, shaking his head in frustration. "It's like...she did all this cool, magic stuff for them, so *of course* Mike liked her when we were thirteen...I wasn't even *there*...and now she's the only thing he cares about. When I was missing she was probably the only thing he cared about..."

That last part just slips out, this secret, silly fear that lives in a dark dusty corner of Will's mind.

Jonathan's face has gone soft at the edges. He doesn't look confused anymore. Will averts his eyes, feeling heat creeping up the back of his neck.

But then Jonathan just said, "Yeah. I know it sucks...if El and Mike are turning into this closed unit after all these years of all you guys being so close."

"Right, yeah. It's exactly that." Will says, relieved. Jonathan gets it. That means it's just normal.

Jonathan seems to hesitate, then he adds, "You know Aaron?"

"Sure." Aaron is one of Jonathan's roommates. He was one of the first friends Jonathan made freshmen year at NYU. He's a painter, and once when Will went with Joyce to drop Jonathan off, Aaron showed him his work, and complimented Will on the drawings he'd seen in Jonathan's room. Will thinks he is unspeakably cool.

"When, uh, he and his boyfriend Daniel got really serious last year, it felt like suddenly he never wanted to hang out. He was barely ever at the apartment. And that was a big change. So I get it."

Will has gone very still. There is a weight to the words, beyond just empathy.

"Aaron's, um....he's gay?"

It feels strange, saying the word out loud.

"Yep."

"You have gay friends?"

Jonathan laughs a little. "I go to art school in New York, buddy. I got gay friends, gay teachers, gay neighbors." Jonathan pauses. "You know I've said this before, but you'd do great there. If it's where you end up wanting to go."

Will swallows. His mouth is dry. "Why are you telling me that?"

"I...." Jonathan trails off, and he's quiet for so long that Will chances a glance up at him. Jonathan pushes his hands through his hair, looking the slightest bit uncomfortable. "Just in case, I guess. I know you heard some of the bullshit Dad used to say, when you were little."

Will flinches, he can't help it. In his head, his father lives in the same place as the demogorgon and the Upside Down. Doors he tries to keep shut, tapes he never wants to play.

The boy already acts like a goddamn queer, Joyce, and you're gonna coddle him into a full blown fag...

"So I just wanted to remind you that he's a fucking idiot. Only that

kind of person thinks it's a bad thing for a guy to like guys, okay?"

There's a muscle pulsing in Will's jaw. His throat tunnels, tears pricking at the corner of his eyes. He stares hard at the ground.

"Will, hey...hey." He's aware of Jonathan shuffling closer. "I didn't mean to - I shouldn't be making guesses here. I'm sorry. It just sounded like maybe...I just worry that Dad has you thinking you can't say anything. And you can. But you don't have to. Okay?"

When Will speaks, each word comes out quiet and slow, the only way he can keep his voice from collapsing into pieces. "Mom. always. told him. not to. say. that. about me. Like it was...bad."

"The words he used for it *were* bad, Will. That's all Mom meant."

"I don't. want. her. to be. mad. at me."

His voice is thick and shaky, he sounds like a little kid, but Jonathan pretends he sounds normal. "You kidding? You're worried about *Mom*?" Jonathan's voice warms. "Mom was the only person to believe it was perfectly normal that you were talking to her through the lights. She's seen you being possessed by a fucking shadow monster. If you tell her you're gay it's just gonna seem boring after all that."

Will laughs wetly. Jonathan reaches over and musses up his hair.

"And, sure, Hopper's probably never met a gay person that he knows of. We might have to tell him what that means. But he's nothing like Dad, and he loves you." Jonathan pauses. "So does Mike, by the way. And El. And Dustin and Lucas. When we found you, those guys slept in the hospital waiting room all night so they could be there when you woke up. The Wheelers even showed up and tried to get Mike to come home, and he refused. I don't know about everything else, Will...but I know he's always gonna be your friend."

Will blinks and feels tears hit his cheeks. He sniffles, embarrassed at the sound, and swipes the heel of his hand under his eyes. "Sorry."

"Don't be sorry," Jonathan says calmly. Will loves his brother for pretending there's nothing unusual about him crying.

When his throat feels loose enough to talk again, Will says in a scratchy voice, "I don't...know for sure. Yet. So I shouldn't tell Mom or anybody yet."

"That's cool. I won't say anything. Don't even have to bring it up again until you want to."

Will finally makes eye contact with Jonathan again, forcing a clumsy smile. "Thanks, Jonathan."

"Sure. And hey..." Jonathan half smiles at him, almost apologetic. "I know you know this, but. El hasn't done anything wrong."

"I know."

Before Will gets himself buried in guilt, Jonathan taps his knuckles against Will's knee. "C'mon. Let's go be good kids. Help Mom with dinner or something."

That night, after Joyce and Hop go to bed and Jonathan's off with Nancy to meet Steve for drinks, Will knocks gently on El's bedroom door. He's half hoping she's already asleep, and his knock definitely isn't enough to wake her.

After only a moment, though, she opens the door. She tilts her head at Will, the slightest surprise registering in her expression. They've interacted normally, but haven't really sought each other out in the last few weeks. "Hi."

"Hey." Will shifts his weight, meeting her eyes with difficulty. "I wanted to say I'm really sorry. About what I said, you know, that one night. I feel really bad."

El gives him a tiny smile. "I know you do."

"Do you know I didn't mean it? About you not being my real sister?"

Her smile broadens. "I do now."

"Okay. Good." Will smiles back, relieved. "Do you wanna play Pac Man?" It's her favorite of his Atari cartridges.

"Yes. Please."

They sit on the living room floor and play the game with the volume turned way low. Jonathan slips quietly through the front door after half an hour and sprawls out behind them. "I got next," he whispers.

"No, El does," Will informs him. "Then you."

"Got it."

When Will's turn ends and he hands El the controller, her expression turning steely and serious, he looks back and catches Jonathan's eye. Jonathan grins at him, nodding in something like approval.

The monster is still awake, inside him, but Will gets better at keeping it quiet. He vows not to let it speak for him, ever again.

But he is still not entirely completely without question *certain*, so he does let the monster stand guard over his secret. Part of Will has his fingers wound tightly around a thin thread of hope, that it really is just about Mike being his friend.

But then, there is an older boy working behind the counter at the comic book shop, who smiles at Will at just the right angle to make his chest fill with light. Or the new kid Ben who sits next to Will in

art class, and he touches Will's arm in his enthusiasm over Will's comic book pages, just five seconds of contact that make Will aware of every nerve on his skin.

The summer before his senior year of high school, with a little over the phone encouragement from Jonathan, Will tells his family. Just his mom, first, and there's this second where her eyes fill with tears and Will's heart tries to eject itself from his body.

"Mom, don't cry. Please." He's begging rather than comforting, thinking *please please please don't let this be something that makes you sad*.

But then she says, "Oh, honey, you just look so worried....I'm so, so sorry if I've ever made you think you couldn't tell me."

He hugs her hard, everything loosening inside him, as though he's still a little boy believing fiercely in the safety inside his mother's arms.

El doesn't know what he means by gay, but when he explains, she listens with quiet concentration, the way she always does when they teach her something new. Unlike his mother, she doesn't end the conversation with reassurances that she loves him; she doesn't know that some people might meet his confession by taking love away.

Will lets his mother talk to Hop, and the next morning at breakfast his stepdad pats Will awkwardly on the back and announces, apropos of nothing, "I'll tell you the same thing I told El, Will. Boys are trouble...the teenage ones anyway."

From across the kitchen, Joyce tips a smirk at her husband. "Funny, my parents used to say the same thing about you."

He doesn't tell his friends, yet, and El promises not to either, not even Mike. He knows his friends well, they have grown up together in every sense of the phrase, yet he can't be sure how they feel about this kind of thing. All four of them learned the word *queer* as an insult, spat with saliva and derision from the mouths of schoolyard bullies, so how could they *not* believe it's a bad thing to be?

During his senior year of high school, there are some days Will inexplicably wakes up with enough bravery to go to school with eyeliner. He likes himself that way, intense and a little bit bolder, mimicking his posters of David Bowie or Robert Smith.

On one of those brave days, just before Christmas break, he's with Lucas and Mike outside the school's choir room, waiting for Dustin (because Dustin sings in chorus now, who would have guessed?) when something small and hard hits his chin.

"Forgot your lipstick, faggot."

The gold plastic tube clatters onto the floor. Will's eyes track from it to the perpetrator, Danny Burke, yet another high school version of Troy in a high school that still includes Troy. Danny is all rough edged aggression in his short, stout frame, and both Lucas and Mike have at least a head of height on him, but not Will.

Will's spine stiffens, and he thinks of Bob, the way he always does when he searches himself for courage and comes up short. "Go away," he says, far too softly.

"Yeah, fuck off, Danny." Mike's glaring from Will's side. "Leave him alone."

"This your boyfriend, Wilma?" Danny smirks, raising his voice and trying to draw a crowd.

Will's face flames, his heart feels stuck to the wall of his chest, and he's so scared to look at Mike, but suddenly Lucas steps forward and picks up the lipstick, smearing it messily over his own lips, and then approaches Danny, reaching facetiously for his hand. "How 'bout you, Burke, you wanna be mine?"

Danny recoils, disgust and fear flickering together across his face. "Don't fucking touch me."

"You're the one carrying around makeup, man, I'm just picking up your signals."

Some people laugh, way more laughter than Danny's feeble insults got, and Danny just shakes his head and slinks away, muttering

about *queer-ass little shits* as he goes.

Will looks down at his feet, aware of the spectator students dispersing. He hears Dustin's voice as he approaches, "What's going on?" then "Are you wearing *lipstick*?"

"Danny was just being an asshole," Mike tells him, every syllable still hard with anger.

"Son of a bitch," Dustin mutters, pointless but emphatic. No one has to explain anything else. Danny's asshole-ness always comes in the same form, always directed at Will.

"He's right, though," Will says softly. His hands are shaking but his voice isn't yet. "About me."

"What?"

"No he isn't, c'mon."

Will looks up to make sure the hallway has emptied out. It has, but then his eyes don't know where to land. They decide on Lucas, who still has traces of bright red streaked on his mouth. "I am a..." His teeth graze his bottom lip, forming a *f*, but he can't bring himself to say the word. It would feel like biting down, drawing blood. So he instead he says, all in a rush, "I do think I'm gay. That I like guys. So he actually is right about me, and so is Troy and Matt and my dad and everybody else." His voice snags and he looks away again, wrapping a hand around his backpack strap and staring down at the tile floor - they're at *school* and he is far too old to cry at school.

There is a short, terrible silence, but then Lucas says, "Doesn't make the way he says it right."

"Yeah, man," Dustin tells him. "Who cares if you're gay? He doesn't get to be a piece of shit about it."

There's not a scrap of surprise in either Dustin or Lucas's expression, but when Will finally braves a glance at Mike, he looks genuinely taken aback. Will's stomach crumples, and he's worried Mike is cataloguing old memories, realizing something Will hadn't meant to admit, and without meaning to he whispers, "Sorry."

"What?" Mike's eyes widen a little. "What are you sorry for? Don't be sorry." He smiles in a way that makes Will remember how long they've been friends, and how good it feels to be his friend - even if that's all they are. "This doesn't change anything for us, right, guys? We're not gonna let Danny or anybody else mess with you."

Lucas lets out a scoff. "Yeah, Mike, you were a real bodyguard back there." He ups the pitch of his voice, making it tremble exaggeratedly, "Yeah, f-ff-fuck off, sir! L-l-l-l-l-leave him alone."

"Shut up." Mike shoves Lucas while Dustin laughs, the air between them returnign to normal.

There will be awkward, stilted questions later - *how long have you known* and *do you like anyone at our school? Like a guy?* - but for a second, Mike is right, nothing is changed. It is just the four of them, the way it's always been, and the familiar, comforting song of their laughter getting mixed up together.

Everything is little bit better after that, even though nothing changes that you can see. But Will is no longer holding a secret under his tongue like an ulcer, and it feels like he can finally speak freely.

They graduate. Will's mom cries and takes a million photos after, and the monster in Will's chest barely even huffs when Mike and El pose together, his graduation hat tilted on her head while she laughs.

He goes to New York, to art school, the same as Jonathan - even though he's no longer a student there, Jonathan still lives in the city, sharing a cramped room with Aaron and two other college friends. It helps, knowing he's there, even though he lives many many subway stops away.

Even so, Will is anxious and lonely the first few weeks in New York. He feels small and uncool, and on the fourth night in his dormitory -

his roommate Kyle is out, no doubt getting drunk at a party Will missed the lesson on how to find - he writes four long letters: to Mike, El, Dustin, and Lucas. A lot of the content is the same, telling them about the city and his classes, but he doesn't mind the time it takes to repeat these descriptions. He crams drawings into the margins, and the next morning he goes to the student store to buy stamps.

El calls him when she receives the letter, and they have a nice forty-five minute phone conversation. Will discovers he likes his sister on the phone; it has her saying more than two sentences at a time.

Mike and Dustin send back postcards from their own schools, cramming in brief descriptions of their first weeks rife with exclamation points and, on Dustin's, copious curse words.

Lucas is the only who really, properly writes back.

2. Chapter 2

Will hadn't come right out and said that he was having trouble adjusting, but he's pretty sure the loneliness was still seeping through the space between words. In his first letter, after giving Will a rundown of his campus, classes and roommate, Lucas writes:

It's weird, right? College I mean. Like suddenly we've got a whole new level of studying and homework but on top of that we're LIVING in a brand new place where we don't know anyone. The first semester should be no classes. Or at least no grades or homework. They should teach classes on stuff like doing laundry, this guy on my hall already flooded the dorm basement with suds. It was kind of funny, people went down and played in it until the RA showed up and freaked.

I've met a bunch of people, actually too many people to keep track of, cause everyone's so desperate to figure out who their friends are going to be, but it still feels exhausting. Like I can't relax around people yet because I'm still not sure they fully like me, so I still have to TRY. And I don't even really know if I like anyone yet because I'm still too busy trying to get them to like me. Does that make sense? I feel like I'm writing LIKE too much. It's kind of weird writing letters instead of just talking to you. Maybe it jsut seems weird because Dustin can't interrupt me so I actually get to finish a thought ha ha.

It's been taking me forever to fall asleep all week. I mean, my roommate snores like a freakin jungle animal, but it's not just that I don't think. The bed just isn't my bed, ya know? I miss waking up and knowing I'm gonna automatically see you guys even if we don't have plans. I even miss my parents, but you can never tell Mike or Dustin I said so.

Will reads the letter three times, and then immediately sits at his desk to write a reply. This time, he admits more.

Want hear something really stupid? I've been having these nightmares again. Like I'm in the Upside Down, and I can see you guys or my mom or Jonathan but I can't get you to see or hear me. I always wake up when the demogorgon starts to come for me. It's so annoying because it was so long ago but I guess that's gonna be there anytime I feel even a little bit nervous about something. So that's fun.

Lucas's reply comes on two pages, front and back, and right on the first one he says:

I know that sucks, and it's not at all stupid, but maybe at least it should remind you that you can handle anything. You were lost in a freaking alternate dimension with a crazy monster and you made it out. College and New York City and snobby art students should be a piece of cake.

That makes Will smile, and it reminds him of what Jonathan said to him, that day in his fort when he took his first tentative peek out of the closet. He keeps reading, Lucas's next paragraph:

Isn't it weird that we never really talk about all that anymore? I mean, I know it's been a long time. But we went through CRAZY stuff. You especially, I know, but I mean we were all part of something completely unbelievable. I'm not gonna say this in a way that makes sense. Do you ever look at other people here and think how NOT normal it was? And how they'd never believe it even if we told them? I know it doesn't even make any difference anymore, like in our day to day lives, but it still feels like it matters. Like I'm never going to be friends with people the same way I'm friends with you guys, because no one else will know what happened. I don't know. Or maybe that's being dramatic.

He changes the subject then, telling Will about his math professor who reminds him a little of Mr. Clarke, and a party he went to in off campus house where one of his new sort-of friends got drunk and passed out on the lawn.

Then, a whole page and a half later, he suddenly writes:

Also, Will, I'm starting to worry now I shouldn't have written all that about how everything with the Upside Down doesn't affect our day to day lives. That was dumb of me, because obviously it affects yours and you just wrote to tell me about how it does. Obviously it affects you more. And I'm going on about how people don't believe what WE went through when really YOU were the one who went through the worst. So just ignore me okay? I don't want to go back and rewrite this whole thing, and also I kind of like not planning what I'm going to write in these, so it's more like we're actually talking, and I guess that means even the dumb stuff I say gets left in. That and also the party story went on way too

long. Just know that I know that.

Will is grinning down at the page by the time he finishes, and he understands what Lucas means about it being like an actual conversation, because his fingers are already itching for a pencil, wanting to reply right now.

Dear Lucas,

Actually I'm really glad you said all that, because I think about it all the time. I mean the stuff about how we'll never be friends with other people the same way as with each other. It's true, and I'm glad it's not just me. And even if what happened was worse or bigger, you guys KNOW about it. You guys were there. That's really really important actually, because you're right, people wouldn't believe us if we tried to explain. I told you I've been having nightmares. It's a little better now, but they still happen sometimes, and I'm so worried that I'm gonna end up screaming in my sleep or something. And then Kyle won't know why, he'll just think there's something wrong with me. And it's not like I can say 'sorry but one time I was lost in a dark cold dimension and a monster was coming for me and I talked to my mom through the lights but couldn't tell her how to find me so it's still sometimes traumatic.' I'd sound like a crazy person. But you guys just know. And even if it never comes up it's still good to know you know (I'm using 'know' even more than you were using 'like' ha).

For some reason, they keep the subject alive in their letters. Just a paragraph or two remains dedicated to it. They share things about their side of it none of them have ever talked about before. It's easier, in writing, when Will can change the subject just by skipping to the next line of notebook paper.

They talk about it under the guise of commenting about how strange it all was, how decidedly not normal. But then Lucas sends Will things like:

I mean, we literally saw your body, Will. Or whatever it was they made to look like it. I don't know if we told you this, but I was the one who believed you were dead. I felt bad about that for so long. I would have just given up if Mike hadn't pushed. But that body. It looked so real. I didn't sleep that whole night after we saw you get pulled out of the water. My mom and dad sat up with me, cause at first I was just crying a bunch,

and I mostly just remember feeling sick. I kept thinking how are we ever supposed to trust LIFE again, you know? Like if a the most ordinary night ever could end with you dying, how were we supposed to go through a single day thinking it would end okay? I know I'm telling you stuff you know again. That you know way more than the rest of us. But I still think about it sometimes. How I didn't believe Mike. By the time we went to your funeral (more insanity - you had a FUNERAL) we all knew you were alive. We'd heard you talking to your mom over the walkie. And I felt so bad that I was ready to believe you were gone.

By the next paragraph, he's talking about his younger sister calling him at school, and how weird it is that she genuinely seems to miss him when all they did when they lived in the same house was bicker. But it's the little glimpses Lucas gives Will into the time he was missing that he reads over and over.

Once, after Will's described the best he can what the Upside Down was, Lucas writes back:

It's kind of horrible to think about you being awake the whole time you were gone. Like, knowing what was happening to you. When we were that age, it was like you only existed the few times we could hear you. And even then we were mainly focusing on it meaning you're alive. Not that it meant you were alone and scared. For all that time. Can't believe you made it out of that and had to go through a whole other level of shit.

You're a fucking superhero, you know that Byers?

That last sentence is a paragraph all to itself. Will sometimes wishes he could cut it out and fold it in his wallet, like a good luck charm, but there's writing on the back of the page, too, and Will doesn't want to render any other part of the letter unreadable.

One time, after Lucas mentions it (*I was such a dumbass kid, wearing that camo bandana and riding my bike up to the lab by myself like I could storm the gates*) Will sends back a drawing of Lucas, the way he imagines him, a superhero on his bike, a one man rescue mention. Will's got a photo of the four of them at age twelve, but he barely needs to reference it once he gets going. Lucas sends back a polaroid of the drawing, tacked on the bulletin board above his desk. It almost exactly matches the one in Will's dorm room, like all

universities mass order their furniture, and Will likes that, thinking they're the same.

He also spots, at the edge of the photograph, the corner of another drawing of Will's, already hung up. It's barely in the picture, so Lucas obviously hadn't added it for effect.

Will likes that, too.

It's gotten better, at school, and Will has more and better stories to tell Lucas in the letters, on either side of the more confessional paragraphs. He's only in one art class that first semester, but the kids are all so serious and talented that it first it made Will embarrassed by the frivolity inside his sketchbook. But one day he sits next to a girl named Casey who tells him about the original comic she's working on, and after class he falls into step beside her and shyly admits he wants to write and draw a graphic novel.

The two of them fall easily into friendship. Casey knows more about comics than Will does, and he's pretty sure she could best any of his friends. When he tells Lucas about her, he starts off with, *I met Dustin's dream girl*. As soon as he writes it, Will realizes she's kind of Lucas's dream girl, too. He doesn't say so.

But one day he and Casey are eating lunch in the dining hall when a pretty girl with purple hair walks by and says hi to her. When she's out of earshot, Casey rolls her eyes. "I hooked up with her at a party last month. She was wasted enough to puke on my desk chair but not drunk enough to forget what I look like, apparently. The worst amount." Casey must read surprise in his expression because she said, "I'm bi. Equal opportunity employer, ha."

"Oh. Okay." Then, before he can overthink it. "I'm gay."

Casey smiles, not like she's surprised. "Cool."

Will sits there stupidly for a moment, not even eating, just marveling

at the simplicity of the moment. During all his earlier coming outs, he never could fathomed one that felt so casual.

Casey starts talking about other things, but before they split up for the day, she says, "Brainwave! You should come out with us tomorrow night. Just me and a few friends. You'd like this place."

It's a gay club. Of course it is.

One of Casey's friends, Nicholas, gives him an ID that looks nothing like Will beyond the basics (white guy, brown hair), but it gets him in anyway. He kind of laughs to himself when the bouncer waves him through, barely a glance at the license. This will make for a good letter this week.

There are a lot of student age people there, more guys than girls. Will mostly gave up the eyeliner after high school ended, at least during the day, but he put it on tonight for a last minute rush of confidence. Casey had grinned approvingly when she saw him. "You look *hot*, boy."

Will drinks more than usual, hoping there is something to phrase *liquid courage*, and then he's dragged onto the dance floor.

(In a letter to Lucas: Casey took me to a club with her friends, Nicholas and Violet and Andrew, and you won't believe this but I used a fake ID. It was a gay club, that's actually a thing here, but I didn't know that's where we were going. It was kind of a lot, so loud and crowded, but I think I had fun. I suck at dancing but the lights are flashing so fast I don't think anyone can even tell who's good or not.)

(In Lucas's letter back: I would pay. SO. MUCH. MONEY. To see you dancing at a gay bar. Please describe your signature move and spare no detail.)

The third time they go there, he dances with Casey's friend of a friend, a tertiary member of their group for the night. His name is Christopher, he goes by the whole name, he's a sophomore and he's studying acting, and that's the only information Will gleans from him before they get to the club and the pulsing music crushes all conversation. But they've been there an hour when Christopher

touches the back of Will's hand and inclines his head to ask him to dance. Self-consciousness nudges Will a few notches closer to sober, but Christopher is taller and he knows what he's doing, so Will follows the best he can through two songs before Christopher kisses him.

It's sudden and graceless. Christopher's hands are on Will's waist, he's still kind of dancing, but Will has to give up entirely to focus his hazy, vodka drunk brain on getting the rest of it right.

This is Will's first kiss, probably later than a first kiss is supposed to be, but it is wet and weird and wonderful. He is kissing a good looking boy and that is *allowed*.

It is magical for reasons that have nothing to do with Christopher. Will doesn't even know him, and he's kind of glad, because in that moment it's like he could be kissing any boy he ever wanted to.

He can't wait to tell Lucas. It's become habit, now, anytime something funny or interesting or confusing happens: he automatically starts arranging it into words for his next letter.

That night, when he gets back to his dorm room (alone - Christopher offered to walk with him but Will got nervous and insisted too hard that'd he be fine on his own), he's sobered up just enough to sit at his desk and pull out the half finished letter he plans on sending tomorrow.

Hey Lucas I know I stopped mid thought in that last paragraph and I'm sorry about that but I just got home and it's exactly 2:14 am but I wanted to tell you something. I went with Casey to the club tonight, we met some of Andrew's friends there in line. There was this guy Christopher there he goes to our school but he's a year older. He started dancing with me on the dance part of the club. He ended up kissing me. So. Ta-da. My first ever kiss, only five years or so behind, thank you very much. Well, behind you and Mike. Only three behind Dustin. That's actually not that many. It felt like it. Now I don't even mind. Worth the wait. Anyway. I wanted to tell you right away and I'm still kind of drunk. You might be, too, because it's Saturday night. If we were on the phone we could do a toast. I like the letters though.

Will wakes up the next morning with a bullet of a headache, and he cringes when he reads back the paragraph he wrote, the handwriting much sloppier than his usual neat, blocky scrawl. He shakes out his hand a little then adds a couple concluding paragraphs (*sorry for drunk writing, but you once said we shouldn't censor it so it's more like a conversation. Thank God I didn't actually call, right? Full on drunk dial.*) so he can mail it later that day.

Lucas's next reply takes longer to arrive. They're very prompt, replying back and forth, so it's easy to notice even a few days delay. Even though Will reread what he wrote before sending it, he starts to question his own memory, with this panic, sickly feeling that he drunk wrote something he really shouldn't have.

But then the reply comes, and it's a normal Lucas letter, though he doesn't mention Will's club encounter, not even to make fun of him for drunk correspondence, until the very end, only two short sentences.

And, hey, congrats on your dude. So is Christopher your boyfriend now?

Will frowns down at the page. It's the first time Lucas doesn't seem to understand something Will's told him. That the kiss wasn't about Christopher. It's about every time Will saw Mike kiss El, or Lucas kiss Max or Jerrika Reese or Rachel Klein, or Dustin kiss Susanna Gold or Jennifer Hayes (Really. Who knew?), and felt like he was being left further behind. It's about how every time he looked too long or too soft at another boy, he'd trained himself to remember that they were *not* an option.

It's about him, Will Byers, Zombie Boy and *fucking queer*, doing something meaningless and fun and *normal*.

Will arranges these thoughts in his head, turning a pen over in his fingers, but it feels too embarrassing and earnest to write down. Even for Lucas.

Instead he just says, tucked at the end of his letter to match Lucas's:

To answer your question, no, Christopher isn't my boyfriend. I barely even know him, and I haven't seen him since that night. It was just nice to feel like I wasn't completely behind you guys anymore. Even just being around other guys who like guys is a new experience.

Anyway, I'll miss you guys over Thanksgiving. Say hi to Hawkins for me.

- Will

Jonathan's working as a photo assistant for a newspaper in the city, and he only has Thanksgiving Day itself off, so he's not going home. Will's mom wanted to buy him a bus ticket back to Indiana, but he's got a lot of work to get done, and he's curious about the "Orphan Thanksgiving" Jonathan and his roommates are hosting at their place. So he reminds his mom that Christmas break isn't far off, and he'll be in much better shape for his finals if he stays in New York to study.

Casey's from Seattle, so she's also staying on campus to avoid an expensive plane ticket. Jonathan lets Will invite her to Thanksgiving, and the two of them are the youngest people there. Aaron and his boyfriend keep telling Will he's adorable, and Jonathan lets him have wine, so Will's face pretty much feels like it's on fire the whole day.

After dinner, there are a dozen twentysomethings crowded around every available surface in the living room. They're playing some kind of complicated drinking game involving cards stuck under a beer can tab. Will opts out, leaning against the side of the couch below his older brother. He likes seeing all of Jonathan's friends, their easy, lived-in camaraderie, but it also makes him more homesick than he's been in months. Not for his bed or his room or even his mom, although he felt guilty and too far away when he talked to her on the phone that morning. What he misses most is the Wheelers basement, and the long history of friendship that fit perfectly inside of it. All

four of them, Will and Mike and Dustin and Lucas, and sometimes El or Max.

He's waiting on a letter from Lucas, it's not his turn, but Will starts composing a new one in his head anyway. He wants to remember every funny thing the sort of adults are saying to repeat back to Lucas, but at the end of the letter Will would still say he wishes he would've been back home with them.

Casey comes to sit beside him. She's pink cheeked and happy, the edges of her words eroded by alcohol. "Who're you sitting here thinkin' about all dreamy?"

He feels himself blush. "Nobody."

"Liar."

"I'm serious. I was just wondering what my friends back home are doing."

Will feels the couch shift behind him, and he looks up to see Jonathan standing. He asks the room in general, "Anybody need another drink?" Then he looks down at Will and Casey and smirks. "Anybody but the minors. You two are cut off." His friends boo him good-naturedly, and Will probably blushes again from all the eyes on him.

When Jonathan walks to the kitchen, Casey nudges her shoulder against Will's. "Your brother's cute."

"He has a girlfriend."

"Hmmm. Is it serious?"

"Yeah."

"Well, fuck. I'm doomed to never be with a Byers boy. *C'est tragique.*"

Will grins. He'd bring Casey home with him, in his Thanksgiving fantasy. Watch Dustin lose his mind over her. He'll miss her over Christmas. Her and Andrew and Violet, and also Miles from across

the hall, who brought a TV and Nintendo to his dorm room and is always thrilled when Will shows up wanting to play.

It's sort of sad, that there's no scenario where he can get all his favorite people in one spot. But he knows it means something good, too; no matter where he is, Will has people worth missing.

(Lucas's letter that comes at the beginning of next week starts like this: *Hey Will, I really missed you this week. You ruined our attempt at a reunion.* Will likes that he didn't say *we*).

Winter break between semesters is pretty long, but both Dustin and Lucas are spending Christmas itself out of Hawkins visiting out of state family. They're gone by the time Will gets in from New York, but he's content enough to spend first two weeks with his family and Mike.

Mike comes over on Christmas Eve, and they're all spread out in the living room, full from dinner and watching *A Christmas Story* on TV. Will glances over at some point and sees Mike with his arm around El, the firelight flickering golden across their faces, and it doesn't hurt even a little bit. He likes that Mike's here, that Mike's nearly a part of the family this way.

It makes him aware of all the ways he's grown up.

With everyone's holiday traveling, they aren't all together until New Year's Eve. It's Will and Mike and Dustin and Lucas and El and Max in the Wheelers' basement with lukewarm beer. For the first hour, they're like hyperactive little kids, high on each other's company, giggly and talking over top of each other like they have get months of conversation out at once.

Except Lucas and Will. At some point, Will starts to tell a story Lucas already knows from his letter, and Lucas catches his eye and grins, small but gleaming like a secret.

They forget to pay attention to the clock, and midnight changes the calendar without fanfare, sometime during the part of the night when Dustin and Max and El are dancing, barley serious, to an old mixtape they found of Nancy's. Will is between Mike and Lucas on the couch, laughing at them, and at some point El grabs Mike's hand and tugs him to his feet.

At some point, maybe either in the last or first moments of a year, Lucas nudges Will's elbow with his own. Will tilts his head to look at him expectantly, but Lucas just smiles with one side of his mouth and says, "Hey."

Will smiles back and echoes, "Hey," the word barely audible under the music. It feels appropriate, an extra, private greeting between the two of them. It's dumb, but Will suddenly feels shy around Lucas. It occurs to him that before the letters, they've never talked so much just the two of them. More often than not, there had always been Mike and Dustin's voices there, too. He wonders if the others would think it was weird, how thoroughly they've kept in touch. He wonders if he's the only one who knows every class on Lucas's schedule, and what his dorm room walls look like, and that he likes his freshmen seminar in criminology so much that he's thinking in majoring in it, that he's been looking into requirements for Quantico after college.

Later still, Mike and El sneak quietly upstairs, and not long after that, Dustin and Max fall asleep on the carpet and a recliner, respectively. Will doesn't think he could stand if a silence between he and Lucas turned awkward, so he says, too enthusiastically, "I brought something to show you."

"Oh, yeah?"

Will nods and goes for the backpack he'd stowed in the corner of the basement. He pulls out a binder with carefully ordered pages and places it carefully on Lucas's lap, feeling the first flicker of nerves butterfly somewhere just below the throat. "It's, um.

This thing I've been working on. Well, it's a graphic novel, I guess. It's about...well, everything that happened."

"No way...." Lucas stares down at the front cover, showing three boys on bicycles, staring at an abandoned fourth bike in the foreground. He starts to turn the pages like they're particularly delicate, something almost like awe sweeping across his features.

"It was going to be a comic maybe, but then I just kept going. I don't know, I guess it could still be broken up in smaller parts, but I kind of like it all together."

"You never told me you were doing this."

"I know. I wasn't sure at first if it was a good idea. The thing is, it was because of what you said, when we first started writing." He's nervous and talking fast. "About how many friends we make now aren't gonna be the same, because they'd never believe us about what happened. And I know this isn't the same. Because it'll just seem like a story. But, like I can show Casey this when I'm done. And at least she'll know what it was like, even if she doesn't think it was real. And she'll think I'm just writing myself as a character, but that makes it safe and easy to talk about a *character*, ya know? And maybe it'll be a little better than if I never tell her anything at all. And not just her, but anybody, ya know? Any of our newer friends."

"It's so cool," Lucas says, and his voice is hushed, like there's a private museum kept inside Will's binder. He pauses on a full page drawing of himself, a more detailed, carefully rendered version of the drawing Will mailed him months ago. Lucas grins down at it, his twelve year old self looming on the page like a hero.

"You were really helpful, all the letters...you talking about what happened with you guys, that had to be a big part of it and I didn't know everything."

"It's so good. It's so crazy to see it like this." Lucas drags his eyes away to meet Will's. "You gotta show everybody."

"I will. I just wanted you to be first." He lets that hover for a moment, but then chickens out and adds, "Since you gave me the idea

and all."

Something quiets down in Lucas's expression, and his gaze feels searching in the long moment before he asks, "So do you write letters with the other guys, too?"

"What? No." Will frowns, startled by the question. Such a thing wouldn't even have occurred to him. "The very first one I did, yeah, but since then...it's just you."

"I figured, but I wasn't sure." There's a smile trying to leak out of Lucas's eyes. He looks down at the pages again, hiding it.

"Are you?" Will is almost certain he knows the answer.

"No."

"Okay."

"Yep."

Lucas continues turning the pages in the binder, and Will lets himself sink back further in the cushions. There's a half empty beer sitting on the coffee table, he thinks it was Max's. He grabs it to have something to do with his hands.

"Can I ask you something random?" Lucas says after awhile, not moving his eyes off the drawings.

"Yes." Will's voice comes out so soft.

The words squeezed tight with discomfort, Lucas asks him, "Did you used to have a thing for Mike?"

Will's heartbeat stumbles slightly, almost tripping. He's quiet for awhile, unraveling the question and following the frayed threads to dangerous, too hopeful places. "I....yeah. A long time ago."

"Oh."

Will's eyebrows draw together, worry hitting him for the first time. "Was it really obvious?"

"Not then. But looking back, I thought maybe."

Lucas's voice is small, almost disappointed. Still slouched low on the couch, Will is looking at the back of his head. He has this instinctive urge to downplay it, say it was just a stupid crush, but he can't bring himself to shrink it down like that.

Mike taught him how to want someone. And then he taught him the exact way it hurts when you don't get them.

So he says something true: "We were just kids."

"Yeah...." Lucas's voice trails off, and Will sits up enough to see what page he's looking at. It's a drawing of Mike and El.

Silence settles over them like an itchy, too small blanket. Will wants to throw it off but he can't think of what to say. His fingers curl, wanting a pen and paper. That instinct in his head is still flipped on, planning how he'll describe moments to Lucas. Maybe he would risk more honesty in a letter, pass it to Lucas like a note. He would write:

Why did you ask me that, about Mike? Because it seems like maybe you think the answer means something it doesn't. You aren't asking the right question. Don't ask about back then. Ask me about now. Ask me, Lucas.

Or even:

Do you know how much you scare me right now? I'm trying really hard not to want something I can't have again, but I don't know for sure if you are or not. Either way you can tell me, nothing has to change, because no matter what it means I think I need your letters. I haven't had to learn how to be in New York without hearing from you once a week. I am never as homesick as right after I read them, but it's worth it anyway.

Then Lucas surprises him. He leans back on the cushions, too, and his eyes are sad. "He was always the best at being there for you, wasn't he? After everything."

And again Will can't bring himself to deny that. He still remembers Mike's steadying hand on his, making promises he couldn't keep, like

the strength of their convictions would be enough to stop a monster. "I think...he was hurting, too. Because of El being gone. Maybe that made it easier for him to see."

"I'm sorry."

"Why are you sorry? Did you *see* this? Did you see you?" Will grabs the binder again. He opens to the page with Lucas; his one man rescue mission. "We were just *kids*."

Lucas reaches over, touching his hand to the page like it's proof of the memory. His wrist is resting on top of Will's now. Will's breathing goes sideways.

His eyes need somewhere to land, so he looks at the drawing, too. He wanted to capture all the ferocity and courage he'd heard when Lucas told him the story. It reminds him of another drawing he made, one that isn't part of the book. Lucas, a couple years older, with red lipstick hurriedly applied like warpaint, standing up to a bully just before Will came out to his friends.

It's not such an extraordinary story, maybe. But Will thinks that courage is just as worthy of a comic book.

"I put the drawing you sent me up on my bulletin board. I mean, it's not really *my* bulletin board, I didn't put it there. It's built into the wall at our dorms."

"I know. You sent me a photo, remember?"

"Oh, yeah. Forgot." Lucas grins a little. "I like it. Without context I look like a badass. Instead a stubborn little nerd."

Will smiles faintly, but there's disappointment stirring in his chest. Lucas's voice has lost the hushed, secretive quality to it, and it feels like he's backing away from whatever soft, slightly bruised place they'd talked themselves to.

"Jesus, I forgot how short El's hair was at first..." Lucas says, his attention back on the book. "She should be the next one you show this to. She really *was* a badass."

"I know." And then, Will says, "I guess I should head home." The night feels used up, all of a sudden, and Will wants to end it before it turns into a bad thing.

"Oh. Okay. Without El?"

"Feel like she's staying here for the night."

Lucas laughs a little. "Right. Should you be driving though?"

"Yeah, I'm good. I only had like two beers, and that was before midnight even."

"Oh." Lucas just watches while Will takes the binder back and fits it carefully inside his bag. "Cause I was gonna say, you could walk with me to my house."

Will pauses, looking back to make eye contact, trying to read him. The moment catches between them, airy possibility swelling, until Lucas breaks his gaze and says, "But you're good to drive, so."

"Yeah."

"I'll see ya, man."

"Yeah, goodnight."

"Night."

Will walks through the chilled January air to his mom's car, feeling foolish. He hadn't come back to Hawkins with any expectations. He didn't even know for sure what it was he wanted until the fear that it might not happen arrived, urgent and hot inside his chest.

They all hang out a few more times before scattering back to their respective schools, but the middle of the night on New Years is the only time Will finds himself almost-alone with Lucas.

Will thinks that's for the best.

Will's disappointed anyway.

He has a long bus ride back to the city to listen to music, stare out the window, and mentally compose letters he has no intention of writing.

It's Lucas's turn, technically, though they're nearly a month removed from the last one Will sent, so maybe he won't remember. Will isn't sure how long he should wait before sending one himself. And he isn't sure why he's so worried Lucas won't be writing at all.

But he does, over two weeks into the new semester, when Will had stopped checking his little metal mail slot first thing after class and has a half written letter of his own closed in his desk drawer.

It's such a normal letter, just a little longer than usual to accommodate brief descriptions of all new classes and professors.

There's a P.S. at the end, written in increasingly small, cramped writing to fit at the bottom of the page.

P.S. I definitely want a copy of your graphic novel at some point. Today I was looking at the drawing you gave me, the one with me on the bike. And I was thinking about you showing me pretty much the same image at Mike's house on New Year's. I wish I could be as brave now as I was when we were twelve, going off all on my own. Looking for you.

Will reads that part again and again, wondering why the last three words are a separate sentence, squinting until his eyes hurt at the spacing and scrawl, like he might discover some detail that reveals what Lucas was thinking when he wrote it.

Will takes his pen and writes his own letter, just as normal. He leaves room for a postscript, starts with:

P.S. It's gets harder to be brave when we're older, I think. When we know how complicated stuff is. But I still think you can.

He pauses, not satisfied. After half an hour of staring at the blank lines of composition paper, he gives up, but he doesn't put the letter

in an envelope yet.

That night, at 2 am, in a late night fit of *fuck it*, he adds:

At least now, you know where to find me.

He folds it and seals the envelope.

For the next week and a half, every time Will remembers the letter, it's like the underside of his skin turns cold.

So when Lucas's reply comes, even with no PS or acknowledgement of the previous ones, Will exhales a gust of relief and decides Lucas probably just read what he wrote as a weird, vague joke.

He's just glad they're still writing, the letters back to predictable regularity for the rest of the semester.

Will shows Casey his graphic novel in early April. She makes for an enthusiastic reader, and she loves the story ("Can I just say it's ridiculously fucking sweet that you basically made your mom and sister the heroes?"). Will likes getting to talk to her about it, even if she thinks it's all made up ("Can I just ask...is the Upside Down a metaphor for being in the closet?" "Oh my God, shut up, I hate you.").

She's trying to talk him into staying in New York for the summer. She'll be in the dorms for the first summer session and, as Casey reminds him, "Your brother said you could stay with him, right?"

"Yeah..." One of Jonathan's roommates, the one in grad school at Columbia, is spending the summer doing an internship in Seattle, and he'd told Will he was welcome to crash in the empty room. "I don't know, though. I kinda wanna still have a summer."

"Y'know, summer *does* make it to Manhattan, baby kid."

"I'm older than you," Will reminds her, a lazy reflex.

"Seriously, though. Stay here and....melt into the concrete with me. We'll be sweaty and miserable all day and then we'll find dance floors...that are *also* sweaty and miserable."

"Wow, so tempting. But..." He trails off, smiling helplessly at her. The truth feels too childish to say out loud.

He isn't quite ready for his home to entirely stop being a place he lives. His mom was the hero of so many of his stories, and Will thinks he owes her a few more summers. And anyway, he wants a *summer*, the kind he's always had. Small town summer, with its smell of chlorine and freshly cut grass. His friends and the Wheeler's too-warm basement, campaigns that outlast daylight. El and Mike and Dustin and Max and Lucas and Lucas and *Lucas*.

He's quiet for so long that Casey finally rolls her eyes affectionately, not making him answer. "Fine, fine, I get it. Indiana beckons. My loss."

Unlike winter break, everyone's home for the summer at about the same time. Most of them have to get part time jobs, but after a week or two they find their rhythm again, sliding their mismatched schedules together like tetris blocks. Mike's job is the best, working the shoe rental and lane assignments at the bowling alley, and the others take to going there when they're free - he slips them Ziploc bags full of free coins and they crowd around games in the arcade. El and Lucas always want to actually bowl, and make only occasionally successful entreaties to coax Max and Dustin away from their competitive intensity at the arcade games. Will's an embarrassingly shitty bowler, but he can always be talked into a game.

Three weeks in, he finally shows his friends' his graphic novel, pacing nervously while they crowd onto Mike's couch, everyone hunched together for a view except Lucas, who leans back and grins at Will

from the edge of their huddle.

That night, there's a knock on Will's window. It's late, and it sounds like the rest of the house is sleeping. Will's curved over his desk, drawing, still riding the glow from his friends' enthusiastic praise of his book. His instinctive response to the taps is fear - it takes him a few frozen moments to pick out the morse code rhythm of the sound.

He immediately feels stupid, like a little kid afraid a monster is still coming for him, but the embarrassment is quickly smothered by something else when he pushes aside the curtains and sees Lucas crouching awkwardly in the yard. He's wearing that camouflage bandana, tied around his forehead.

It feels like Will's heart is being held down and silenced - his self-preservation has a firm hand over its mouth, and the result is a kind of bewildered expression and dumb blurting of, "What are you doing?" before he's even opened the window.

Lucas pulls a mocking expression and indicates the window between them and the lack of sound coming through it. Will's fingers feel clumsy, like tools he's never had to use before, as he unlocks the windows and raises it up. Heat is creeping up the back of his neck, probably flooding his face. Rather than repeat his pointless question, he just says, "Hi."

"Hey." Unlike him, Lucas seems entirely functional, even determined, as he gives Will a strangely businesslike nod and then hands him a folded piece of paper. "I wrote you a letter. I'm going to wait here while you read it."

"Wha...." Lucas actually backs away, and Will sticks his head out the window to follow his progress into the yard, where Lucas flops down onto the grass and leans back on his hands. Only then does Will spot Lucas's old bike overturned carelessly in the yard, even though he has his own car now.

Will's eyes move between the paper and his friend, now seeming to stargaze with a maddeningly serene expression. "This is really weird."

"Yeah, but you can handle it." Lucas says lazily to the sky. "We had very strange childhoods, if you haven't realized."

Very slowly, Will unfolds the notebook page, his eyes taking in the familiar sight of Lucas's handwriting but deliberately not catching the words yet. His heartbeat is forceful inside his chest, his blood buzzing; it feels like his body is trying to register the enormity of a Big Moment but is too frazzled to let the moment play itself out.

He takes a few slow, deliberate breaths. He leans back inside his window, just enough so the lamplight hits the letter.

Dear Will,

I wanted to write this letter right at the end of the semester - okay, actually, I've wanted to write it a bunch of times this year but I came the closest just before classes ended. I was really serious about wanting it to get to you just before we came home. But then I wussed out and just wrote some crap about finals. And then we got here and I figured I'd have to actually talk to you, because who sends a letter to someone you see everyday in person. But I was mad that I missed my chance to say it like this, because I think it'll sound better when I write it down and also once its on paper and the paper is in your hand I can't bail like I could in a conversation. So even though I'm doing this whole thing where I'm channeling my braver twelve year old self like I said I wanted to, just know I'm aware this is still kind of lame.

So two quick things. One is that when you told me about kissing that guy Christopher I got jealous. And two is that I hooked up with a guy at school not long after Christmas break. And there were a lot of steps between those things, but they're still sort of related. I didn't do it because I was jealous. But I did it to see if being jealous meant what I thought it meant. I was pretty sure after New Year's. I wanted to kiss you in the basement. But I couldn't decide if I should. Maybe I should have been the one to make the move - because you've had every reason to think I only like girls so I was the one changing things - but it didn't feel like that. It felt like you'd liked all kinds of guys, and so far I only liked one. You. I don't know if that makes sense. But I was thinking about how when we were younger, it was Mike you would have chosen if you'd had the choice. And I was thinking that maybe the only reason we kept in touch was because none of the other guys wrote you back. I know it was real,

that we were getting closer even though we were further away, but it also felt random. I could have been anybody. Or at least, any of our friends.

And also yeah, I wasn't sure if I really was into guys, too. I didn't know if I wanted to be. So I went to a party I knew would be a good place for it and I met this guy. It didn't go that far, but it went places. And I didn't hate it. But I also wished it was you.

I think you wanted to kiss me in the basement on New Year's. And I think you were telling me something when you told me I knew where to find you in that letter. But I also worry that I just think that because you're gay and my friend and maybe I'm just projecting or whatever (I took a Psych class last semester in case you can't tell)(actually you already knew that because I told you that. Because I want to tell you everything.) I am the one who wrote you back and I'll keep writing even if you tell me that's all it was.

Love,

Lucas

Will only has to read the letter once. He can't wait long enough to read it again. His hands are making the page tremble, and for just a second the back of his throat prickles warmly the way it does when he's about to cry.

He swallows, and sets the letter down on his desk carefully. He peers through his window, framing Lucas on the lawn - he looks so relaxed, but he can't possibly be feeling that way, after bleeding a bit of his heart onto this page and handing it over.

Will marvels at how quiet it is. How deceptively still. Then he takes a brave breath and vows that he will step through the window and fully into this moment that is about to happen, finally, finally.

He doesn't decide what to say before he slips outside. He has put so many words in so many letters, and he's held even more of them back, but when it comes down to it Will is an artist. So when he lies down beside Lucas, it feels like the creation of a dreamy, gorgeous image inside his head: the two of them on the grass, ducked under the stars, Lucas's bike adding an aching nostalgia at the edge of the

frame.

Lucas opens his eyes when he hears Will beside him, and there's a jolt of a moment where Will can fully see the wild fear rioting behind his carefully constructed gaze. Will smiles at him, warm eyed and soft mouthed, and he says, "You really biked here?"

Lucas's answering grin is equal parts sheepish and proud. "I committed to the bit."

"I'm impressed." He pauses, and the quiet between them is nice, but Will doesn't want it to settle long enough to hide behind. "Um. That thing you said about Mike....when we were thirteen you chose Max when you had a choice. So."

His face tightening with worry, Lucas says, "I know. But...it feels different."

"It isn't. I mean...not in a way that matters." Will hoists himself up on one elbow and looks down at Lucas, his tone earnest and open in a way that might be embarrassing if it wasn't past midnight, if they weren't already absurdly lying in his front yard, if it was anyone but Lucas. "We were thirteen. Now we're not. So we make different choices. And...you *are* the only one who wrote me back. But that's not a bad reason. You wrote me back because of who you are and how you felt. And we kept writing - I hope - because we were saying the right things for each other. *Your* letters....they could have only happened with you." He pauses to scoop up a little more nerve. "The way I feel....could only be about you. It is completely entirely about you."

"Okay. Uh. Okay, good." He looks at Will, a smile trying to sneak out. "So, that letter...that was all okay to say?"

Will nods emphatically. His hands have spent months wanting to touch him, so he reaches for Lucas and nervously traces the edge of his bandana. It's slipping a bit, from Lucas lying on the ground, and Will gently adjusts it.

Lucas visibly sets his jaw, and when he speaks again, there's a catch in his voice. Like he's afraid. But he's doing it anyway. "Could I kiss

you?"

"*Please.*" It just leaps out of Will, he's not trying to be cute. He just can't help begging even after the offer has been made.

They're in an awkward position for it, Will raised up on one side and Lucas flat on his back, looking up at him. It would make more sense for Will to bend down, but Lucas was the one to ask, so he curls his body and tries to lift himself up at the same time, with no real support, and Will instinctively lowers his elbow to accommodate the movement, but he goes down too hard on his shoulder and the angle is wrong, Lucas sticks out an arm for support and ends up on top of Will, caging him in. They both laugh, their faces so close to each other the breath hits their lips, and it's the best sound ever, the laugh is just as good as the kiss for a few seconds and then, *no*, the kiss is the greatest thing to ever happen. It's a triumph, a rescue, it's fireworks, a crescendo - it's the happy ending of every story lucky enough to have one. And it is also messy and graceless and, yes, a little bit strange, because they are Lucas and Will and they've waited over a decade to start doing this together.

Every few minutes they pull away just enough to get a look at each other, swapping wild grins that somehow serve as confirmation. At one point, though, Lucas doesn't dive right back in, but speaks for the first time in a good fifteen minutes, shaking his head mock mournfully and saying, "Man, we're gonna get so much shit from those guys, aren't we?"

Will's head could spin right off his body right now, with the dizzying force of his happiness, because he hears the delight humming beneath Lucas's joke, singing the implication that *this* truly is the new state of things between them. It will outlast the night. He gets to keep it.

"Probably," Will confirms, shaking his hair out of his eyes. "I can take it." He'd pushed Lucas's bandana off at some point, and he retrieves it from the grass and hands it back with a knowing smile. "And I know you can handle it."

Lucas takes the bandana and seems to consider it for a moment. "Here." Gently, Lucas takes his hand and ties it carefully around

Will's wrist. "You keep it."

The gesture steals his breath, and for a second Will watches Lucas's fingers work. His chest constricts, emotion swelling too big for it to hold. He has to blink for a few moments before he can lift his eyes to Lucas. "Thank you for coming for me."

Light floods Lucas's eyes and he nods. "Always." His hand still on Will's, he leans down and kisses him, the softest, sweetest kiss yet. Not just of the night, but of Will's whole life. Maybe anyone's.